DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 416 549 CS 509 748

AUTHOR Ellis, Carolyn
TITLE What Counts as Scholarship in Communication? An Autoethnographic Response.
PUB DATE 1997-11-00
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Communication Association (83rd, Chicago, IL, November 19-23, 1997).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audience Response; *Communication (Thought Transfer); Ethnography; Higher Education; *Personal Narratives; *Scholarship
IDENTIFIERS *Autoethnography; Narrative Text; Oral Presentations; Research Styles; *Stigma

ABSTRACT

An educator, an "old timer" in sociology but new in the field of communication, sees her work as a "calling," a "mission." She wants the audience to feel the emotion of autoethnography. To bring research to life, she chooses three autoethnographic vignettes to show scenes in which a different kind of stigma is felt: the first illustrates racial stigma, the second depicts minor bodily stigma, and the third displays stigma of disability and embarrassment through association. She hopes these vignettes move listeners to feel stigma and to sense some of the evocative power that comes through the concrete details of autoethnographic narrative. The question: "What counts as scholarship in communication?" can be reworded to become What does scholarship do? or What meaning does it give to people's lives as academics? It is easy for presentations to take on characteristics of a shootout at the OK Corral, and there must be a better way to communicate. (NKA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 416 549

*What Counts as Scholarship in Communication?

An Autoethnographic Response

by

Carolyn Ellis
Department of Communication
University of South Florida
4202 East Fowler Ave., CIS 1040
Tampa, Fl. 33620
cellis@chuma.cas.usf.edu

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
C. Ellis
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

*This paper was delivered at a *National Communication Association* Research Board Session entitled *What Counts as Scholarship in Communication? Evaluating Trends in Performance Studies, Autoethnography, and Communication Research*, Chicago, Illinois, November 1997. Thanks to Arthur Bochner for supportive and probing discussions about this presentation.

CS 509748

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

What Counts as Scholarship in Communication? An Autoethnographic Response

The cursor beckons from the grey glow of the 17-inch computer screen. Her fingers rest nervously on the Microsoft ergonomic key board. She reminds herself to keep her wrists straight. Her e-mail has been answered, the laundry folded, her fingernails filed evenly. Sharpened pencils stand ready. She types, "What Counts as Scholarship in Communication?" The word "counts" catches her attention; she smiles. A question mark fills the space between the query and the subtitle of the panel, "Evaluating Trends in Performance Studies, Autoethnography, and Communication Research." She remembers endorsing another title when the session first was organized--"Alternative Modes of *Doing* Scholarship in Communication"-- a title that presumed rather than questioned the legitimacy of performance and autoethnography. She wonders why policing has gained priority over educating.

The task she faces seems daunting. To in 10 minutes, just 5 pages, write a convincing paper on the work she has been immersed in for over a decade. The audience. She considers the audience. But that is not so easy. Who will be there? Traditionalists? Interpretivists? Friends, colleagues, her students? She's not sure. Why will they come? To learn about autoethnography (Ellis, 1997a)? To voice their rage or support of "Sextext" (Corey and Nakayama, 1997)--the piece that inspired the polarized response of the Communication community in the first place, which then led to this panel? To put performance and autoethnographic studies in their rightful place, which would be no place. To see a good battle? To whom does she speak?

How should she make her case? Does she present the facts? Speak from citations? Should she show how autoethnography relates to ethnography? Talk about how widespread it is? Does she rationally argue her case? Anticipate and defend against the accusations she knows will

come? Self-absorption. Yes, that surely will be the first criticism. Does she argue that showing concrete details of a specific life can convey a general way of life? That good autoethnography always speaks beyond itself? That the personal *is* political? Does she go on attack? Accuse orthodox social scientists of being self-absorbed in the worst kind of voyeuristic way--of gazing at others while protecting their selves from scrutiny, and writing only for themselves and their small tribes?

Will these strategies convince anyone who is not already convinced that autoethnography is scholarship? Probably not. Yet, she knows she is expected to give her opponents an argument to evaluate, some propositions to shoots holes in, for that is their way of knowing and persuading. One side has to win, doesn't it? We can't both be right, can we? Harmonious tolerance of difference would be too much to expect, wouldn't it?

She considers telling an autoethnographic story instead. Risky! Though potentially more persuasive. Follow the autoethnographic mantra, she tells herself. Show instead of tell. Understand self to understand others.

But she's in a precarious position. While an old timer in sociology, she's new in the field of communication. She's not familiar with all the players, or the plays. She doesn't know what to expect. Will revealing herself simply open her personal self as well as her ideas to attack?

There's more going on than this, she admits. She doesn't want to miss an opportunity to proselytize and win converts. She sees her work, this work, as a calling, a mission. Let the audience *feel* the emotion of autoethnography. Bring life to research. Bring research to life.

She begins with three autoethnographic vignettes from longer stories she has written in the past. Each vignette shows a scene in which a different kind of stigma is felt: the first illustrates

racial stigma; the second depicts minor bodily stigma; and the third displays stigma of disability and embarrassment through association (cf. Goffman, 1963).

The first story:

It's 1969. She's on her high school senior trip to Florida. She's a white girl from a small, rural, southern town, attracted to Jesse, one of only two African American males on the journey. Prior to lights out the first night, students go for a walk on the beach. Immersed in talking about being Black in a White world, she and Jesse wander away from the others.

"You always remember you're Black, " Jesse says. "People's responses remind you."

"What was it like growing up?" she asks.

"We had no money. My father left when I was a baby, so I was raised by my ma and grandma. Then my mother remarried. Once I woke up and my step-daddy had a butcher knife to my throat."

"Oh, my God. What did you do?"

"I ran outside. In the freezing cold, with no shoes on, in my underwear. I got frostbite on my toes.

"What'd you done to make him so angry?"

"Nothin'. He was drunk. And he was always jealous that my mother loved me more than him. That's all. Just jealous."

"We better go back in," she says, noting that everyone else has disappeared. She wonders what people will think about their being out in the dark...together...alone.

She leads the way into the room where the other students have gathered. She feels she has nothing to be embarrassed about since her time with Jesse was so innocent. What she feels

does not matter when all eyes turn on her and she experiences the deadly silence of all voices stopping---at precisely the same time. She has never felt such hostile attention before. Jesse, who has, hesitates before walking into the same treatment a few moments later. In those few silent, enraged moments, she knows viscerally a little of what it feels like to be Black in a White world--just a little (excerpted from Ellis, 1995, pp. 152-153).

The second story:

"I love your voice," she says to the clerk as she opens the door to leave the store.

"What?" he asks, frowning and somewhat befuddled.

"Your voice. I love your voice," she responds.

"Oh, I hate my voice!" he says, his speech taking on a course edge.

"But I'm sure others must tell you this all the time. Your voice, I mean. How nice it sounds."

He leans over the counter and waves his hands in dismissal, as if her compliment is the most absurd thing he has ever heard. "I've always hated my voice," he continues loudly. "I won't even let it be taped. I can't stand hearing it."

As he talks, the roughness of his words more and more camouflages the melodic qualities of the voice that attracted her so strongly. Suddenly she hears the sound, a slight lisp on the "s," more apparent in the passionate voice he uses now than when he spoke calmly and softly before.

"Well, now maybe you'll change your attitude about your voice," she says, unwilling to drop the conversation.

"No, maybe you'll change <u>your</u> attitude about my voice," he says in a surprisingly aggressive and passionate tone, as the door swings shut.

Once on the street, she wants to rush back into the store and continue to talk to the man who hates his voice. She understands how he feels. She wants him to know that she hates her voice too, every time she has to say a word with an "s" sound. She'd tell him how much she hates repeating her office phone number--974-3626, even her last name Ellis. She imagines that they'd laugh at how often she practices before recording the message on her home answering machine. You have reached 989-0544 (better to say "o," not zero). Please (the "l" and "s" combination are a disaster) leave a message (two "ss" in that one) at the sound (remember to place tongue in the "t" position) of the tone."

She'd tell him that, as a professor in a speech communication department, she fears she's judged by her voice. That her lisp--oh, god, lisp is the hardest word in the English language for a person with a lisp to say--has always been something to get past. She wants to tell him how hard it is to speak in public without being aware of her voice; how she sometimes hears the slurred "s" as she talks, her self-consciousness then making the slurring worse. "I can't stand to hear my voice either," she'd tell him with passion, perhaps even a touch of frustration and anger.

She recalls the first time anyone ever acknowledged her lisp. In third grade her teacher refused to let her read aloud to the class, a favorite activity for which she always volunteered. In front of the class in response to her outstretched, waving hand, the teacher said, "I'd rather you didn't read because your voice is so hard to understand." That day she hid behind the girl sitting in front of her and she cried. She thought she read so beautifully, with so much expression,

and she always knew all the words. Hard to understand? Wasn't she the best reader in the class? Embarrassed beyond words, she never volunteered to read in class again, nor did the teacher ask her to.

At that moment, standing on the street, she feels ashamed to feel these feelings so strongly. She realizes that she has never told this story or admitted these feelings to anyone (excerpted from Ellis, 1997b, pp. 7-9, 19).

And the last story:

She's in the lobby of the theater with her partner, who is critically ill with emphysema. He has refused to let her retrieve his battery powered wheelchair from the car, though he is having trouble breathing and his oxygen cannister, which he needs to walk, is low on oxygen. On the way out of the theater, he carries the oxygen tank on his shoulder and insists that she carry his cane, which opens up into a chair. Enter the scene briefly as she--struggling for some measure of independence from the weight of her caretaking role as well as distance from the oddity of how they appear to others--walks away from her partner momentarily to greet some friends she sees across the lobby.

Their conversation soon is interrupted by a loud voice yelling, "Help! Help!" Embarrassed and angry, she rushes to him. "The Chair. I need the chair," he gasps, pointing to the cane. She unfolds it and he sits down quickly in the middle of the lobby. She narrows her shoulders and looks to the floor, trying to make herself invisible to the people staring at her.

Between gasps, he says in a loud voice filled with hatred, "You castrating bitch." With that, she storms out of the theater, not waiting to see if he is okay. At that moment, she hates

him (excerpted from Ellis, 1995, pp. 121-122).

Now she moves out of the stories. She hopes these vignettes, even without their larger contexts, have moved listeners to feel stigma and to sense some of the evocative power, embodiment, and understanding of life that comes through the concrete details of autoethnographic narrative. She can't help but wonder if the occasion of this presentation will provide yet another vignette of stigma.

She suspects the audience is waiting now for her to return to the question posed by this panel, "What Counts As Scholarship in Communication?" First, she plays with rewording the question: What does scholarship do? How is scholarship used? How do we feel when we read it? What meaning does it give to our lives as academics? Then she rereads her earlier text in preparation. She notes the words that hide there--players, plays, sides, argue, precarious, risk, policing, opponents, defend, attack, battle, shoot, win. She recognizes how easy it is to slip into the metaphor of argument as war (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 4) and for our presentations to take on characteristics of a shoot out at the OK Corral (Tompkins, 1992, pp. 227-233). She thinks there must be a better way to communicate.

She looks at her watch. She's running out of time. Oh, well, maybe it's for the best. "What counts?" That's not her question. What counts? My goodness, why do we talk that way?

References

Corey, F. and T. Nakayama. 1997. "Sextext," *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 17, 58-68.

Ellis, C. 1995. "The other side of the fence: Seeing black and white in a small southern town," *Qualitative Inquiry*, 1, 147-167.

Ellis, C. 1995. *Final negotiations: A story of love, loss, and chronic illness*. Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press.

Ellis, C. 1997a. "Evocative autoethnography: Writing emotionally about our lives," In W. Tierney and Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Representation and the text: Re-framing the narrative voice* (pp. 116-139).

Ellis, C. 1997b. "'I hate my voice': Coming to terms with minor bodily stigma," unpublished manuscript.

Goffman, E. 1963. *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Lakoff, G. and M. Johnson. 1980. *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Tompkins, J. 1992. *West of everything: The inner life of westerns*. New York: Oxford University Press.